

In the 1990s, starving North Koreans built a secret information highway

Smuggle in food, smuggle out video



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An amateur video smuggled from North Korea to China on June 10, 1997 shows a mother and child in a detention camp set up for the victims of starvation. (AP Photo/APTV)

apanese journalist Ishimaru Jiro paid his last official visit to North Korea in 1998. By

J then, roughly 1.5 million of the country's inhabitants, nearly 5% of its population, had died from starvation. No one knew the precise number, because the North Korean government refused to admit a crisis existed.

Ishimaru knew he wasn't getting anywhere with strictly guided tours around the relatively prosperous capital of Pyongyang, when just outside its borders people's teeth were rotting, and babies were dying of malnutrition. But then he discovered the *jangmadang*, a type of illicit street market that had sprung up near the Chinese border, where people were not only buying food, they were starting to communicate their stories with the outside, an act of treason punishable by death.

Starting in 1994, North Korea began suffering a years-long famine the government called the "Arduous March" (words like "hunger" were banned from all propaganda). In response, the country launched jaunty campaigns encouraging people to "eat two meals a day" and promoting "alternative foods" like bark and grass. Outside organizations estimated up to 800,000 North Koreans died that year, the peak of the crisis.

With hundreds of thousands dying in a country under government-imposed isolation, information was literally a matter of survival.



The famine inspired a propaganda campaign at odds with the reality of starvation.

Desperate citizens near the border, theretofore terrified to disobey their government, began sneaking into China in search of food, foraging, or

trading for bags of rice and firewood. Slowly, towns near the border were known for their *jangmadang*, markets that sold goods obtained illegally. “Trading necessarily began as small acts of desperation that emerged almost ineluctably when absolutely nothing else worked,” wrote Justin V. Hastings in *A Most Enterprising Country: North Korea in the Global Economy*.

Over time, the border’s sophisticated trade networks gathered more than food. North Koreans acquired foreign music and Walkman players, especially those discarded by richer Chinese people who by that time were upgrading to iPods. They played Western movies on contraband DVD players, despite laws forbidding most electronics. The media exposed North Koreans to versions of democracy they never knew existed.

“Listening to the radio gave us the words we needed to express our dissatisfaction,” wrote Kang Chol-hwan in *The Aquariums of Pyongyang*, an account of his childhood in the Yodok concentration camp. Kang escaped the country in 1992. “Every program, each new discovery, helped us tear a little freer from the enveloping web of deception.”

As people grew bolder in their smuggling efforts, and as they learned more about their country’s elaborate brainwashing efforts, Ishimaru spotted an opportunity.



A Chinese tourist, left, runs back after giving a bag of food to an armed North Korean border guard in the middle of a stream which marks the border between the two countries, near the Chinese border city of Dandong, Sunday, April 25, 2004. North Korea has received about 8 million tons of food aid since 1995, when the secretive Stalinist regime revealed that its state farm industry had collapsed from decades of mismanagement and the loss of Soviet subsidies. (AP Photo/Greg Baker)

The border was “the first time was when I was able to speak freely without any restrictions in terms of my conversations with the North Koreans,” Ishimaru told The Korea Society in 2014. There he found citizens eager not only to receive information from across the border, but to send it *out* too.

In 2002, as part of Asia Press International, a consortium of freelance journalists, Ishimaru began outfitting volunteers with hidden cameras. Slowly he trained them with interviewing skills, and how to spot human rights abuses. He had helped create a citizen journalist insurgency within a totalitarian dictatorship. If caught, they might be able to pay off the police. Or they would be charged with treason, and maybe shot.

“Despite this, I want to say proudly that I do this for democracy. It has to be done. It must be done,” said one reporter called Lee Jun. His identity and voice were disguised for Ishimaru’s camera.

The videos soon proved that, despite the *jangmadang*, extreme poverty persisted. Homeless children scrounged for crumbs on the sidewalk. At the train stations, paraplegic people swung their bodies across the ground. Others scavenged stray pieces of coal that fell from passing trains. One interviewer asked an orphan child why he doesn’t find a job, such as chopping wood. “I don’t have an arm,” he replies. It was ripped off by a passing train.

“You can’t say it, but a lot of people worry about how they’ll live in the future,” another reporter relayed via phone.

One video smuggled back to Ishimaru shows a group of military men loitering in a courtyard. They are slouched and emaciated, in fact, waiting to be transported away. They are too weak to perform duty. One soldier speaks to the camera. His face is blurred, his thin neck swims inside his uniform collar. *Is anyone suffering from malnutrition?* “Everyone. Everyone in our unit,” he says. *How much are you eating?* “I am not sure if I can say...It is so miserable that I cannot tell you,” then admits he just wants a bellyful of corn. Indeed, another soldier says the occasional meal consists of cornmeal and salted pickles.

The tapes and information coming out of Ishimaru’s network were featured widely in international news outlets like *The Economist*, BBC, and *The Japan Times*. In 2007, Ishimaru founded *Rimjingang*, a magazine that publishes news from inside North Korea to this day.



Bootleg DVD and VCD movies are arranged on a shelf at a store in Pyongyang, North Korea, Thursday, June 20, 2013. (AP Photo/Alexander F. Yuan)

When it had rebounded from the Arduous March and forced some independence from China in the mid 2000s, North Korea found time to crack down on border black markets. But food, goods, and media networks were already deeply entrenched.

A 2010 study by the US Broadcasting Board of Governors found that 74% of North Koreans had access to a TV, and 46% access to a DVD player. “At first I watched outside media purely out of curiosity,” a 27-year-old woman known as Yanggangdo told research group Intermedia that same year. “However, as time went by, I began to believe in the contents. It was an addictive experience. Once you start watching, you simply cannot stop.” This new generation had no plans to regress.

Ishimaru’s reporters are still filming. They wrap USB drives in plastic bags and float them across rivers into China. They bribe guards. They face danger every time. One day in 2013, the government reportedly executed 80 people for smuggling illegal media.

Kim Dong Chul, a driver who lives in North Pyongan province, collects footage for Ishimaru: “To convey the truths is the right thing...to report the harsh life of people is the right thing.” He can’t capture everything, he caveats, but will try to report as much as he can.

As of 2014, Ishimaru had made more than 100 reporting trips to the border. He had interviewed more than 900 North Koreans.

“It’s not easy to predict when the regime will fall,” Ishimaru said in a 2014 *Frontline* documentary. “However, the foundations of change in North Korea are being laid. North Koreans have undergone a huge shift in their collective mindset. I think change will come.”

Today, the country’s economy is expanding rapidly. Despite government efforts to retain control, as more goods enter the country, the information highway is adding more lanes.

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